

Sofia Bertolli
BalestraHere and above:
Balestra spring 2024

FASHION

Balestra to Focus On U.S. Comeback

- The brand has inked a distribution agreement with The FNA Group for the U.S. market.

BY SANDRA SALIBIAN

MILAN — After initiating a new strategy last year, the Balestra brand is now fully committed to expanding internationally, starting with a big focus on the U.S.

“The American market has been pivotal in marking the success, and therefore the growth, of Balestra since the ‘60s, when we were present in more than 70 department stores. So it was almost our duty to go back and restart from there,” said Sofia Bertolli Balestra, granddaughter of the late Italian couturier Renato Balestra and recently appointed artistic director of the brand.

To propel its expansion Stateside, the company has inked a distribution agreement with The FNA Group, a multidisciplinary agency focused on wholesale and marketing initiatives.

The goal is to boost distribution in the market and kickstart a series of activities, including creating exclusive items in partnership with indie multibrand stores with the goal to “support these boutiques by providing them with something unique, while treating customers, too,” said Bertolli Balestra.

The move marks a return to the company’s roots, since the founder — who died last year — had already designed exclusive collections for the likes of Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman, Foley’s, Neiman Marcus and Lord & Taylor, as well as for Isetan in Tokyo, throughout his career.

Bertolli Balestra believes the company’s Made in Italy production could attract shoppers Stateside, as well as the company’s collaborations with celebrity stylists, such as a sequined cape in the

signature Balestra Blue color recently worn by Jared Leto on stage during a concert.

Again, resuming its ties with the world of international celebrities mirrors the work of the founder himself, who opened his first atelier in 1959 in Rome — where the company is still based — and designed costumes for the likes of Ava Gardner in “The Barefoot Contessa” and “The Sun Also Rises”; for Gina Lollobrigida in “Beautiful but Dangerous”; for Sophia Loren in “Lucky to Be a Woman,” and for Candice Bergen in “The Adventurers,” among others, becoming a favorite of movie stars including Elizabeth Taylor, Claudia Cardinale and Carroll Baker, to name a few.

While custom-made creations for VIPs and private clients are part of the brand’s DNA, Bertolli Balestra underscored that the strategic changes set in motion last year were aimed at instilling the couture ethos of the label into ready-to-wear collections that could be accessible to a wider community.

“We felt the need to open up to the public and get in touch with a larger audience and with consumers that are more interested and curious than ever,” she said about updating the brand’s heritage for the times.

The label presented its first ready-to-wear collection during Milan Fashion Week in February last year to coincide with the company’s “reload,” as Bertolli Balestra defined the new course. As reported, this was marked by a rename of the brand to only the founder’s last name, a new logo and a new positioning, with collections integrating a daytime offering to flank the more eveningwear pieces.

The new spring 2024 collection that the brand is presenting to buyers in New York this week before holding sales campaigns in Paris comes with prices between 800 euros and 1,800 euros.

Conceived with a versatile approach, the lineup is rich in separates designed to be mixed and matched and that play with the feminine-masculine duality, as seen in oversize poplin shirts enriched with dégradé effects and meant to be worn over denim pants or sequined culottes.

The mannish attitude of slender tailoring and oversize suits is offset by hyper-feminine frocks mixing draping, transparencies and lingerie details, as well as sensual gowns featuring cutouts and embroidered details.

Allover sequined looks also abound and convey the brand’s sense for glamour with new ease, thanks to their uncomplicated silhouettes encompassing miniskirts, micro bralettes and liquid column dresses. Elsewhere, cropped volumes, bare midriff and ribbons wrapping around the body telegraph a seductive, youthful attitude targeting a new generation of consumers.

Overall, fabrications range from printed jersey and tulle to delicate lace and eco fil coupé, as Bertolli Balestra pointed during a preview in Milan. “For us the promotion of the Made in Italy craftsmanship remains the main focus,” she reiterated. “We also recently found great ateliers and laboratories in the Lazio region [where the company is headquartered] which ensure a sort of zero-kilometer production and even more control on quality.”

Over the past 12 months, such a feature particularly resonated with European and Middle Eastern customers, as Bertolli Balestra said distribution was mainly concentrated in these markets.

The positive feedback received from the first two ready-to-wear collections contributed to Bertolli Balestra’s appointment as artistic director of the brand. In her new role, she is tasked with overseeing the creative vision of the label across the board, with the goal to turn Balestra into a lifestyle company with

extensions beyond womenswear.

The brand remains privately owned by the family, with the founder’s daughters Fabiana — Sofia’s mother — and Federica Balestra still at the head of the fashion house, retaining roles as chief executive officer and president of the company, respectively.

Bertolli Balestra joined the family business in 2010, after graduating in Letters and Journalism at Università la Sapienza in Rome, specializing in contemporary art and piling up experiences in the art and fashion fields across Rome, London and New York.

At the company, she started promoting the couture collections of the label in the American market via events and trunk shows. During these years, she has built the brand’s impressive archive, which includes more than 40,000 sketches and drawings, hundreds of gowns, videos and newspaper articles.

Through the help of the archives, she knows who the Balestra woman is and, she said, and “now I want to go beyond that: I want to democratize the brand and reach out to women who are more similar to myself.”